

Professional Ethics by Lloyd Robertson

Saskatchewan surgeon, Dr. John Marion, once said "a doctor can kill a patient but he can't sleep with her". His comment was prompted by the College of Physicians and Surgeons' refusal to discipline anaesthetists who administered to several patients at the same time. Dr. Marion had been present when patients developed a reaction to an anaesthetic when the anaesthetist was unavailable, in another operating room. The College held that this was standard medical practise and no medical ethics were breached.

Rules against dating patients or clients are found in the codes of ethics of all professional associations. There are also rules about maintaining professional competence and providing good service. The problem that Dr. Marion saw was that "competence" and "good service" depends on what the other professionals generally do. What if what they do is not good enough? Dr. Marion led a campaign to change that professional standard with some success. I was even invited to speak to the College of Physicians on this topic.

I am a member of three professional organizations that enforce codes of ethics: the Saskatchewan College of Psychologists, the Canadian Counsellors' Association, and the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers. Each has rules governing the behavior of members. Consumers have a right to know about these codes and a duty to report on unethical behavior when it occurs.

Psychologists are subject to 151 standards or rules divided into four broad areas:

- 1) respect for the dignity of the person;
- 2) responsible caring;
- 3) integrity in relationships; and,
- 4) responsibility to society.

Sometimes ethical principles conflict. For example, what happens if a client plans on killing themselves? Does the professional still respect confidentiality? The psychologists' say "no". The ethical areas are listed according to priority with "1) respect for the dignity of the person" as most vital and "4) responsibility to society" the least vital of the four areas. "Confidentiality" is part of "3) integrity of relationships" and is less important than "2) responsible caring"; therefore, the psychologist informs those who need to know to keep the suicidal person alive.

The counsellors' ethics are based on the following principles:

- a) respect for the dignity of persons;
- b) not wilfully harming others;
- c) maintaining integrity in relationships;

- d) responsible caring;
- e) responsibility to society;
- f) respect for self-determination.

Social workers are to act in the best interest of their clients. We are to maintain professional competence. We are not to exploit a professional relationship for personal gain or gratification. We are to maintain confidentiality. Unlike the ethics of the other two associations, social workers are directed to advocate for change on behalf of clients.

If you are not happy with the standards of a professional association you can, like Dr. Marion, try to change those standards. Feminists were successful in getting a set of guidelines added to the psychologists' code that dealt with their concerns.

Most professionals welcome ethical codes as a kind of protection. Gossip happens and some people enjoy talking about professionals. If you hear that a professional has acted unethically and if that professional is still practising, you have every right to ask the "informer" why he did not go to the appropriate professional organization. You may find that you are learning more about the person telling the story than the person the story is about.

As part of your duty to report breaches of ethical behavior, you have a duty to report on gossip where the gossiper is a member of a professional organization. Alternatively, go to the person being gossiped about to get their side of the story.